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Narratives of Ecological Crisis and Human Responsibility: An Eco-critical Study of Environmental Degradation and Resilience in Barbara Kingsolver's Select Novels

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Introduction

Barbara Ellen Kingsolver is a successful American novelist, essayist, and poetess. She had degrees in biology, ecology, and evolutionary biology. Because of her educational background, she is well-known for her ability to integrate ecological themes into her literary narratives. Nature and the environment play significant roles in her novels. Her novels highlight human resilience and moral responsibility while addressing urgent environmental issues like water pollution, ecological exploitation, biodiversity, symbiosis, climate change, and climate uncertainty.

Eco-criticism is a theoretical framework that examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment. This proposed research focuses on Barbara Kingsolver's five select novels: *Animal Dreams, The Poisonwood Bible, Prodigal Summer, Flight Behavior,* and *Unsheltered* to analyze the narratives of ecological crises through the lens of eco-criticism.

Purpose

The main purpose of this research is to analyze Kingsolver's literary depiction of ecological crises and their impacts on human and non-human life. Understanding Kingsolver's portrayal of human responsibility in combating environmental degradation and exploring Kingsolver's thematic and stylistic techniques to promote awareness and activism is also the purpose of this study. A focused analysis of Kingsolver's novels as instruments for advocacy contributes to the broader field of eco-critical studies.

Survey of Literature

"Eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm). Eco-criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty and Fromm). It is a critical framework that examines how literature represents and critiques environmental issues. Cheryll Glotfelty, and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology;* Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental*

Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture, and William Rueckert's *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* are the foundational texts in the field of eco-criticism. Today, ecocriticism is an established discipline that examines literature from ecological and environmental perspectives.

Remarkable authors like Rachel Carson, Margaret Atwood, and Amitav Ghosh explored ecological issues in their works *Silent Spring, MaddAddam Trilogy,* and *The Great Derangement* respectively to illustrate the influence of fiction in creating environmental awareness among readers.

Kingsolver is one of the numerous authors strongly concerned with ecological changes. She lucidly addresses these problems in her writings. All of Kingsolver's novels are environmentally important. A few of her novels like *The Poisonwood Bible (1998), Prodigal Summer (2000),* and *Flight Behavior (2012)* are the subjects of numerous critical studies. Her novels investigate the problems significant to human beings, the need to protect environmental wealth, and the necessity to respect all living beings.

However, there is limited research on her works exploring the relationship between ecological crisis, human responsibility, and resilience. This study aims to fill that gap.

Research Gap(s)

1. Comprehensive eco-critical analysis focusing on Barbara Kingsolver's exploration of human resilience and responsibility in the face of ecological crises is limited in the research field.
2. Exploration of Kingsolver's narrative techniques she employs to engage readers in environmental advocacy is insufficient.
3. Studies that contextualize Kingsolver's works within global, national and regional environmental challenges are limited.

Importance of Study

Global ecological issues like climate change, deforestation, species extinction, and resource exploitation are the main subject matters of Kingsolver's works. This research positions her works within the larger international discourse on environmental advocacy.

India has been facing significant environmental challenges. Eco-critical studies are becoming increasingly prominent in our nation. This study highlights how Kingsolver's themes can inspire similar literary advocacy in India.

Kingsolver's focus on rural communities, their struggles, and their symbiosis with nature parallels challenges faced in many ecologically sensitive regions, making her works relevant on a regional scale. For example, in *Animal Dreams* she undertakes the difficulty of water contamination from colliery. In *Prodigal Summer,* she portrays how tough farm life can be. In *Flight Behavior,* she lists possible consequences of global warming that can affect living beings.

The research follows an interdisciplinary eco-critical approach by closely reading Barbara Kingsolver's five selected novels (*Animal Dreams, The Poisonwood Bible, Prodigal Summer, Flight Behavior, and Unsheltered)* to provide insights into literature, ecology, and advocacy.

Objectives

The primary objectives of the proposed research work are:

1. To investigate how Barbara Kingsolver represents ecological crises in her novels.
2. To explore the themes of human responsibility and resilience in Kingsolver's novels.
3. To examine Kingsolver's narrative techniques and their role in fostering environmental consciousness.
4. To highlight the importance of Kingsolver's works in advocating for ecological sustainability and human responsibility.

Hypothesis

1. Barbara Kingsolver's novels present that human actions are central to ecological crises and potential solutions.
2. Barbara Kingsolver's works depict the interconnectedness of human and natural ecosystems, highlighting resilience as a pathway to recovery.
3. Fiction is a powerful tool for fostering environmental advocacy and social/behavioural change.

Research Methodology

An Interdisciplinary eco-critical framework is used to analyze Barbara Kingsolver's novels.

Data will be collected from primary and available secondary sources. Barbara Kingsolver's selected novels; *Animal Dreams (1990), The Poisonwood Bible (1998), Prodigal Summer (2000), Flight Behavior (2012), and Unsheltered (2018)* are used as **Primary Sources**. Data is collected by close reading these texts. Scholarly articles, eco-critical essays, interviews with Kingsolver, and other useful sources are considered **Secondary Sources.**

Collected data can be thematically analyzed to examine environmental degradation, human responsibility, and resilience. Textual analysis links Kingsolver's narratives to contemporary ecological challenges. This research follows the MLA Handbook, 9th edition guidelines.

Limitation(s) of the work

The study is limited to five novels by Barbara Kingsolver. This can limit the exploration of her wider literary contributions. It is focused on eco-critical study. So, it can overlook other important critical frameworks. Relying on available secondary sources could result in gaps concerning lesser-studied aspects of Kingsolver's work.

Expected Outcomes

The following are the expected outcomes of the proposed research work.

1. A clear understanding of Kingsolver's contribution to eco-critical literature.
2. Insights into how literature can foster environmental awareness and activism.

Proposed Work Plan (Tentative Chapter Scheme)

The Proposed Work Plan is organised into six chapters. Five novels, written by Barbara Kingsolver between 1990 to 2018, are selected for the study.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter contains an introduction to the proposed study, rationale and significance, aims and objectives, hypothesis, research methodology, scope and limitations, and chapterization,

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A thorough literature review and theoretical framework on the history and development of eco-criticism and environmental literature are presented in the second chapter.

Chapter 3: Barbara Kingsolver's Literary Philosophy and Techniques

This chapter analyses Barbara Kingsolver's biographical influence, style, and thematic strategies.

Chapter 4: Critical Analysis of the Selected Novels

A critical analysis of the following novels is presented in the following sub-chapters.

4.1 Animal Dreams (1990)

4.2 The Poisonwood Bible (1998)

4.3 Prodigal Summer (2000)

4.4 Flight Behavior (2012)

4.5 Unsheltered (2018)

Chapter 5: Kingsolver's Advocacy for Sustainability

Kingsolver's advocacy for sustainability, insights on resilience and human responsibility are included in this chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This final chapter records the synthesis of findings and implications of the study.

Year-wise plan of work and targets to be achieved

Year 1:

During the first year, the researcher conducts a literature review to develop the theoretical framework; and drafts chapters focusing on eco-criticism and Barbara Kingsolver's literary background.

Year 2:

In the second year, the researcher attempts a textual analysis of selected five novels by closely reading them. After that, he writes thematic chapters from 4.1 to 4.5 and presents findings at academic conferences.

Year 3:

During the final year, the researcher writes and refines the final chapters on Barbara Kingsolver's advocacy and the conclusion. Finally, he completes revisions and performs proofreading. At the end of the year, he submits the dissertation and prepares for the defence.

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